

**Water Resources and Environment Subcommittee
of the
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives**

**Testimony
by
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Saving America's Soul Kitchen; how to bring this country together? Listen to the message of New Orleans.
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Now the levee breach has been fixed. The people have been evacuated. Army Corps of Engineers magicians will pump the city dry, and the slow (but quicker than we think) job of rebuilding will begin. Then there will be no 24-hour news coverage. The spin doctors' narrative will create a wall of illusion thicker than the new levees. The job of turning our national disaster into sound-bite-size commercials with somber string music will be left to TV. The story will be sanitized as our nation's politicians congratulate themselves on a job well done. Americans of all stripes will demonstrate saintly concern for one another. It's what we do in a crisis.

This tragedy, however, should make us take an account of ourselves. We should not allow the mythic significance of this moment to pass without proper consideration. Let us assess the size of this cataclysm in cultural terms, not in dollars and cents or politics. Americans are far less successful at doing that because we have never understood how our core beliefs are manifest in culture--and how culture should guide political and economic realities. That's what the city of New Orleans can now teach the nation again as we are all forced by circumstance to literally come closer to one another. I say teach us again, because New Orleans is a true American melting pot: the soul of America. A place freer than the rest of the country, where elegance met an indefinable wildness to encourage the flowering of creative intelligence. Whites, Creoles and Negroes were strained, steamed and stewed in a thick, sticky, below-sea-level bowl of musky gumbo. These people produced an original cuisine, an original architecture, vibrant communal ceremonies and an original art form: jazz.

Their music exploded irrepressibly from the forced integration of these castes to sweep the world as the definitive American art form. New Orleans, the Crescent City, the Big Easy--home of Mardi Gras, the second-line parade, the po' boy sandwich, the shotgun house--is so many people's favorite city. But not favorite enough to embrace the integrated superiority of its culture as a national objective. Not favorite enough to digest the gift of supersized soul internationally embodied by the great Louis Armstrong. Over time, New Orleans became known as the national center for frat-party-type decadence and (yeah, boy) great food. The genuine greatness of Armstrong is reduced to his good nature; his artistic triumphs are unknown to all but a handful. So it's time to consider, as we rebuild this great American city, exactly what this bayou metropolis symbolizes for the U.S.

New Orleans has a habit of tweaking the national consciousness at pivotal times. The last foreign invasion on U.S. soil was repelled in the Crescent City in 1815. The Union had an important early victory over the South with the capture of the Big Easy in 1862. Homer Plessy, a black New Orleanian, fought for racial equality in 1896, although it took our Supreme Court 58 years to agree with him and, with *Brown v. Board of Education*, to declare segregation unequal. Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference was formally organized in New Orleans in 1957. The problem is that we, all us Americans, have a tendency to rise in that moment of need, but when that moment passes, we fall back again.

The images of a ruined city make it clear that we need to rebuild New Orleans. The images of people stranded, in shock, indicate that we need to rebuild a community. The images of all sorts of Americans aiding these victims speak of the size of our hearts. But this time we need to look a little deeper. Let's use the resurrection of the city to reacquaint the country with the gift of New Orleans: a multicultural community invigorated by the arts. Forget about tolerance. What about embracing. This tragedy implores us to re-examine the soul of America. Our democracy from its very beginnings has been challenged by the shackles of slavery. The parade of black folks across our TV screens asking, as if ghosts, "Have you seen my father, mother, sister, brother?" reconnects us all to the still unfulfilled goals of the Reconstruction era. We always back away from fixing our nation's racial problems. Not fixing the city's levees before Katrina struck will now cost us untold billions. Not resolving the nation's issues of race and class has and will cost us so much more.